

Christ of St John of the Cross

Evensong Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne at St James Lower Hutt,
Sunday February 14th 2021

Keynote Bible passages: Colossians 1.15 – 23a, John 21.1 – 8

'Fill your minds with those things that are good, and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honourable.' This evening we begin a series on how art conveys the message of scripture. Indeed many of the great works of art have a theme featuring aspects of the birth, life and death of Jesus the Christ.

1) Thus it's appropriate to begin with one probably well-known, and loved by many. Salvador Dali was a Spanish artist who lived in the 20th century. Before considering the painting we need to know how it got its name 'Christ of St John of the Cross'. This because Dali drew inspiration from a John, (Juan) a Spanish Carmelite religious, who became known as St John of the Cross. He lived in the 16th century and was associated with St Teresa of Avila. He was known as a mystic, and had a profound vision of the crucified Christ 'from above'. This painting, tonight's theme Dali painted in 1951 and it hangs in a gallery in Glasgow.

The painting echoes the writing of *St Cyril of Jerusalem* of the 4th century: 'On the cross God has stretched out his hands to embrace all the ends of the inhabited world. Therefore this mountain of Golgotha is the cardinal point of the cosmos.' Dali himself wrote of it being like the nucleus of an atom, 'I considered it as the very unity of the universe'. One art critic has written of the painting being 'the most enduring vision of the crucifixion painted in the 20th century.'

2) There's some *unique features* to notice – the angle view of the painting conveys the sense of pain of the method of execution, as the significance of Christ's death for all humanity. Yet it is devoid of the nails, of the crown of thorns, and blood. That to me would suggest Christ is not bound to what humans did to him. Some theologians have noted outstretched arms and the shadow of the arm along the cross as symbolising the Trinity and the circle of the head as expressing the unity of all things.

For me it recalls the wisdom and profound statement of Jesus the Christ in the Epistle to the Colossians: 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things were created.' In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.' I'm reminded of the words of the liturgy, 'In your Son you suffered with us and for us, offering us the healing riches of salvation and calling us to freedom and holiness.'

The *darkness* of the sky recalls the description: 'From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.' We have no doubt witnessed those times when clouds build up, usually from the south and the brightness

fades. . Yet note, there's a sense of hope in the painting as the light – the sun continues to shine on the cross. Yet darkness all surrounds.

The *lake* at the bottom of the painting recalls Jesus' ministry by a lake and the call of the disciples to follow him. Or perhaps the event recorded in John's gospel (the second reading) 'After these things, (the crucifixion) Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberias. Then Simon Peter says to the fishermen disciples 'I am going fishing' In the painting we see the net laid out across the beach. Thus in a sense the crucifixion and the resurrection are a timeless sequence.

3) What's so amazing is how the Jesus of the gospels, after the death and resurrection transformed into the Christ, about which St Paul in particular, and the early church became aware of the *Christ as universal, a 'cosmic Presence.'* Hence as the believers gathered for prayer, Luke noted the address to God: 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them....' And Peter whose sermon at Pentecost proclaimed 'Let the whole house of Israel know with certainty that God has made (Jesus) both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified...(Acts 3). Then also the passage from the Epistle to the Colossians of what contemporary theologian Fr Richard Rohr writes of it as 'the universal Christ' the revelation of the Risen Christ was clearly affirmed in the Scriptures. Rohr suggests believers today need to get back to this concept of the Christ, he calls that 'a reclamation project.' A further reminder of this awesome nature we hear in those words of the opening of John's gospel – 'In the beginning was the Word,.....and the Word became flesh and lived among us...' Here's a quote from poet G. K. Chesterton: 'Your religion is not the church you belong to, but the cosmos you live inside of.' Rohr also quotes a possible insight attributed to Albert Einstein: 'There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle. He (and I) opt for the latter. The miracle which is life and the Christ in cosmic presence. We might be alert to the profound insight at the start of Paul's letter to the Romans: 'Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.' (1.20). The Franciscans have a saying, 'Creation is the first Bible, and it existed for 13.7 billion years before the second Bible was written'. And one more quote from Rohr: 'Through the act of creation, God manifested the eternally outflowing Divine Presence into the physical and material world.'

4) The second reading is of a miracle of the *resurrected Christ, on the beach* early that morning 'just after daybreak'. John tells us Jesus stood on the beach and challenged the fisherman disciples to cast their net on the other side of the boat. A miraculous catch, and the disciple John exclaims: 'It is the Lord!' They share breakfast on the beach. Its an unlikely scenario of the risen Jesus and 'none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord'. They share the fish with the bread. And gospel writer John notes, 'this was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.'

How many times in your experience has that risen Jesus come to you and 'the unlikely, the 'miraculous' appeared? For me, those sometimes fleeting, sometimes extended 'lived moments' of the beauty of creation, and those significant meetings, unexpected with another. With lockdown, meeting was rather restricted, yet friendships deepened through sharing in emails. And those

unexpected times which are experiences of divine presence. One recalled was when in Paris I was doing some exploring along the streets and lanes and wandered into a large church (St Sulpice), and there was the organist demonstrating the magnificent sound of the organ to friends, and sitting in a pew I was treated to an impromptu concert. Such times are as Jesus present, as in the current saying: 'Expect the unexpected.' Thus 'Whatsoever things are beautiful, pleasing, commendable' May I echo St Paul's adulation 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!'

Thus Dali's expressive painting shared tonight portrays aspects of the awesome wonder of creation and into it the crucified Christ, now risen, ascended, glorified!



St John of the Cross

Lived from 1542 – 1591 in a town near Avila in Spain. Juan was a contemporary though younger of Teresa of Avila and recognised as one of the world's great mystical poets. His verse reveals a profound, tender experience of divine communion. He joined the Carmelite Order of Friars and worked for the reform of the Order. For this he was imprisoned and for 8 months kept in solitary confinement. Eventually he was released but kept ill health and lived to be in his 50th year.

In 1574 he had a powerful vision of the crucified Christ as if looking down from above. It was this vision that inspired Dali's painting. He was especially drawn to the intimate love poems of the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible. Thus he regarded Jesus as the bridegroom and the bride was the human soul. His writings included about the 'dark night of the soul', and 'the living flame of love.'

Poems of St John of the Cross BELOVED

God held the earth as if it were his lover and spoke with the most tender of feeling to all in existence as he spoke to me,

'Look, dear son, I have made a bride for you, but he is shy; so how are you to consummate?

I want all souls to consummate with me, so I devised a plan:

As each soul nears heaven differences will dissolve to such a sublime extent that when the heart looks upon any object in this world it will cry 'Beloved'

And passionately run into an embrace with me.'

That blessed grace I now know.

I see my Beloved everywhere.

.....
TENDERLY

Tenderly, I now touch all things,

Knowing one day we will part.

.....
PEACE

Quiet yourself.

Reach out with your mind's skilful hand.

Let it go inside of me and touch God.

Don't be shy, dear.

Every aspect of Light we are meant to know.

The calm hand holds more than baskets of goods from the market.

The calm soul knows more than anything this world can offer from her

beautiful womb.